



Christmas 2017 in Town and Country

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Politics: Last year in my xmas letter, I concluded that the white workers who elected Trump would not be rewarded. That has certainly come true. And I also mentioned that never have we elected a president whose lack of respect for speaking truth and indifference to facts of public record were so unprecedented. I believe it was Goebbels who said that if you repeat a Big Lie often enough, it will be believed. That is Trump's continuing *modus operandi* for he keeps spouting the same big lies (and new ones) every day. Like Murdoch's Fox News, he believes that if he keeps asserting it, that will make it come true. His unethical conduct has made the U.S. appear to the world like a corrupt former banana republic of South America. As president, he has not severed his connection to his business or put his investments in a blind trust. He has hired his daughter and son-in-law as White House aides and not made them cut ties to their businesses. He refuses to release his tax returns or the White House visitor logs. Before becoming president, Trump had settled fraud cases against Trump University for \$25 million; had been sued repeatedly for not paying contractors; had lied about his connections to mob figures; and had been accused of unwanted sexual advances by more than a dozen women. His lack of respect for women, treating them like sexual commodities, has helped stoke a wide-spread rage among women leading to the **Me Too** movement which has led to the toppling of many powerful celebrity male icons who share his attitude. Hopefully, his turn will come. As a business man, Trump also was not very good. To overcome incompetence, he had to continually perpetrate fraud by declaring bankruptcy six times, by exaggerating his wealth, and by borrowing capital from Russian oligarchs because Wall Street banks refused to lend him any more money. But he has certainly learned how to promote himself using the propaganda tricks absorbed and used by the advertising industry. Being stuck with this belligerent self-serving fraud as president for another three years is quite depressing. There may be, however, a silver lining in this otherwise sickening nightmare.

The USA has ceased being a democracy and become a plutocracy - which is why and how Trump's election succeeded (worker's rage against the establishment). In the 37 years since Reagan was elected, we have ceased being a democracy and become one in name only. In that interval of time, billionaires led by the Koch brothers, the Scaife and DeVos families, and their ilk, have mounted a concerted attack on democratic government at federal, state, and local levels. Government of, by, and for the people had to be replaced by corporate leaders. The world is run by self-interest (they claim) and who knows more about "profit for me" than business experts?. If led by corporate leaders, the country, through trickle down economics, would surge into "well being for all". The country has certainly surged, as evidenced by an exhilarating soaring GNP. But this increase in wealth has not been shared by the majority of people, only by the top 1% of the population, the bankers, investors, and corporate administrators. No trickle down happened. Wealth inequality due to unfair distribution is the central political issue in the USA now and rapidly becoming a worldwide issue. How, then, does Trump's election serve as a

silver lining to this growing political malaise?

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Guided by James M. Buchanan, the Nobel Prize winner in economics, who taught at George Mason University, most of the goals sought by the Koch brothers (Charles and David) as revealed in the Libertarian platform of 1980 upon which David ran as Vice Presidential candidate of the Libertarian Party, are being achieved. Just google **1980 Libertarian Party Policy Platform** or click on <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/koch-brothers> for almost all of the Koch Brothers goals. Buchanan, however, stressed that stealth was necessary to achieve these goals. And the Koch brothers have been very keen on using stealth. Nobody, at least at the faculty level, knew back in 1980 that it was Koch money that brought Institute for Humane Studies and Center for Study of Public Choice to GMU and the Cato Institute to DC. Or that scientific and journalistic truth were to be deliberately undermined by phony scientific and political think tanks financed by the Koch brothers and other billionaires. Inadvertently, Trump has helped uncover this subterfuge because he is blatant and not secretive in his pursuit of these same goals. His attacks on Social Security, Medicaid, public education, or any kind of social welfare, while pursuing tax benefits for the wealthy make visible what had been kept quiet and invisible before. The recent elections in Virginia, Alabama, and New Jersey which amounted to a repudiation of the Koch agenda because Trump was so clumsy in pursuing them or, which seems likely, he thought his phony rhetoric would always succeed, appears to be the silver lining. One can hope that the 2018 election will be a turning point against this contempt for democracy and its institutions. What I can foresee is that a huge amount of plutocratic money will be spent in the coming year to prevent this return to fairness and truthful democracy in place of bogus “grass roots” movements like the Tea Party (funded by the Koch Brothers).

Most of the info in regards to the above comes from these sources: Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (2017); Gordon Lafer, *The One Percent Solution: How Corporations Are Remaking America One State at a Time* (2017); *Mother Jones* (January issue, 2018); and the earlier Robert Reich, *Beyond Outrage* (2012). The Maclean book, based on the discovery of a cache of letters between Buchanan and Charles Koch, was the most disturbing for me. It revealed with clarity, the Koch brothers intent to infiltrate universities for ideological purposes and to build an intellectual cadre of followers (Mike Pence is one such). GMU has been one of their most successful targets. They have donated multi-millions to GMU to spread their libertarian doctrine through the Economics Department and Mercatus Center, the newly christened Antonin Scalia Law School, and the Institute for Humane Studies. The shift is not in who rules (liberals or conservatives) but in changing the rules in order to save capitalism from democracy, to save oligarchs from having to share their wealth to support Social Security, Medicaid, and public education. That is what Libertarians mean by freedom. This ideology is not just local to the USA. It's being exported worldwide to receptive countries. It's anti-democratic stance is repugnant and has created a growing **UnKoch the GMU Campus** group of faculty and students. More light needs to be shed on this stealth movement to erode democratic values through the use of unlimited and untraceable money to buy elections. One hopes that the recent backlash in three states will continue in the 2018 elections. If it happens, we may have to thank that political incompetent who believes in “alternative facts”, Donald Trump. He has made visible the hidden agenda so cleverly mounted up to now by the Koch libertarians.

To more pleasant tidings from 2017: As most of you know from past xmas letters, I have frequently asserted that a central pursuit of my life has been to find a meaningful continuity principle between culture and nature. Dialogism on the cultural level early on offered the best rapprochement to bring them together with Fritjof Capra, perhaps, being the best guide. (See his and Pier Luisi's *Systems View of Life*, 2014). Perhaps an even better bridge for humanists is the parallel and burgeoning wave of interest in biosemiotics. Wendy Wheeler was invited to clarify this connection for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences by giving the Gras Annual Lecture in the Humanities last April at GMU. What biosemiotics is all about can best be described in her own words: “The biosemiotics realization that

meaning-making belongs to all living things, and that human meaning-making, although distinctive of *Homo sapiens*, has its roots in the common descent of non-human semiotic life, indicates that reality is *not* ‘constructed in human language’. It is experienced in sign relations that are anchored in bodies and in the shared Earth. All other organisms make meanings too, and human life is lived amongst those meanings. Organisms continually both shape and are shaped by the embodied and enminded semiotic relations which both scaffold matter and energy, and also constitute life and meaning on this planet. Human beings are but a part of that global semiosis in which the biosphere is at the same time the semiosphere. In the light of all this, we might conjecture that an environmental ethic of biosemiosis strongly implies the reality of many different readings – among both human and nonhuman organisms – and an imperative to listen and take heed.” (From a Springer on-line publication which she edited dated April 8, 2017). In other words, evolution proceeds not by chance mutations alone; instead, change is governed more by communication and interpretation all the way down to its bacterial beginnings. In the life sciences, read especially Denis Noble’s *Dance to the Tune of Life* (2017) which demolishes NeoDarwinism and its current spokesperson, Richard Dawkins (*The Selfish Gene*). You may, then, like me in my old age, begin to identify with Simeon who, viewing the baby Jesus in his old age, stated “(world) now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace... for mine eyes have seen thy salvation” because now, again, one can feel at home in the universe. If this interpretive turn interests you, look up publications by these authors: Wendy Wheeler, Denis Noble, Jesper Hoffmeyer, and John Deely. You will also discover that semiotics, including biosemiotics, rests much on Charles Sanders Peirce who, more than a century ago, stated “the world is perfused with signs”.

Other good tidings that happened in the past year: In a reaction to the disastrous election of Trump and what it portends for our democracy and the planet, three significant protests were staged in Washington, DC. early in the year. The biggest, over a half million people, was the Women’s March on Washington which took place one day after Trump’s inauguration and directed against his roll back of reproductive, civil and human rights, including his contempt for anything that stood in the way of corporate profits. Then, the Smithsonian Earth Day Optimism Summit attacked the climate deniers and produced 25 local, regional, and international narratives one can draw upon for either background information or educational resources. The People’s Climate March, which drew over 200,000 people and lasted more than a whole day, blocking Constitution Avenue, had representatives from every state, from Maine to even the Marshall Islands. UUBridge with its banner joined in this anti-Trump, anti-oligarch protest . (See pictures). All three of these events were powerful expressions repudiating the capitalist dogma that profit should always be the ultimate value when making political decisions and representing “reality”. Self-serving bullshit should be labelled bullshit which our advert dependent media fails to do.

The Peoples Climate March



UUBridge flag is in center





Peoples Climate March



Peoples Climate March

On Capitol Hill, where I live, yard signs have sprung up like mushrooms. One that I have taken to heart and hope you will, too, especially between now and next midterm elections is this one:

“ A time comes when silence is betrayal.” M.L. King

So resist and openly declare that American democracy should be “we”, not “libertarian me” and vote down this stealthy, fascistic takeover of our country.



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Love Vernon